NIEHS Reaches out with Town Meetings

In an age of high-tech and often indirect communication, the NIEHS is giving environmental health problems and efforts toward their resolution a human face through a series of town meetings being held around the United States. The NIEHS, like other members of the National Institutes of Health (NIH), has long sought public input in setting its research agenda, and town meetings offer a traditional, effective means of obtaining public feedback. "We want to make our science responsive to the American people," said NIEHS director Kenneth Olden. "I don't know how we find out what the American people want without going out and talking to them."

The meetings are cosponsored by the NIEHS and NIEHS-supported environmental health sciences centers. The NIEHS coordinates with the center directors, who set the meeting agendas, focusing on the unique issues in their geographic regions. The goal is to hold four meetings each year.

So far, the NIEHS has sponsored four meetings, two in late 1998 and two in early 1999. All of the meetings have captured the spirit of town meetings through interactive discussions in which community members talked over issues of concern with scientists, academics, local, state, and federal health officials, and political leaders. In turn, scientists and other experts shared their research and knowledge of environmental health issues with the public.

The series of meetings is on target with a 1998 review of the NIH by the National Academy of Science's Institute of Medicine entitled *Scientific Opportunities and Public Needs*. The report challenged the various institutes of the NIH to better interact with the public, stating, "NIH should engage the public to a greater extent in informing the process by which NIH sets its research priorities."

The meetings were attended by community representatives; city, county, state, and federal government representatives; academic faculty, staff, and students; and members of industry. In addition to the agenda developed by each of the hosting centers, other more general issues also emerged from the often emotionally charged interactive sessions, and these were discussed as well.

New Brunswick, New Jersey

On 17–18 September 1998, the first town meeting was hosted by the Center for Environmental Health Sciences of the Environmental and Occupational Health Sciences Institute (EOHSI), a program of the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey–Robert Wood Johnson Medical School and Rutgers University. About 110 people attended. As the most densely populated state in the country, New Jersey encounters a correspondingly high number of environmental health problems.

A public forum at the meeting was opened by Bernard Goldstein, director of the EOHSI and acting dean of the School of Public Health. Goldstein gave attendees a broad overview of environmental health and public health issues in New Jersey, and of how the EOHSI and the NIEHS center are addressing these issues. Samuel Wilson, deputy director of the NIEHS, presented a global perspective of the nation's environmental and public health problems and how NIEHS research and outreach programs are addressing such problems, including the sponsorship of more community-based and community-specific research projects.

In the open dialogue that followed, people from the surrounding community voiced concerns about local and regional environmental health issues. "It was quite clear that asthma—however induced—is a major medical issue in heavily populated areas," said Mike Gallo, director of the Center for Environmental Health Sciences. A group of children from a Latino community attended the forum, and one child spoke about his concern for himself and his classmates who suffer from asthma.

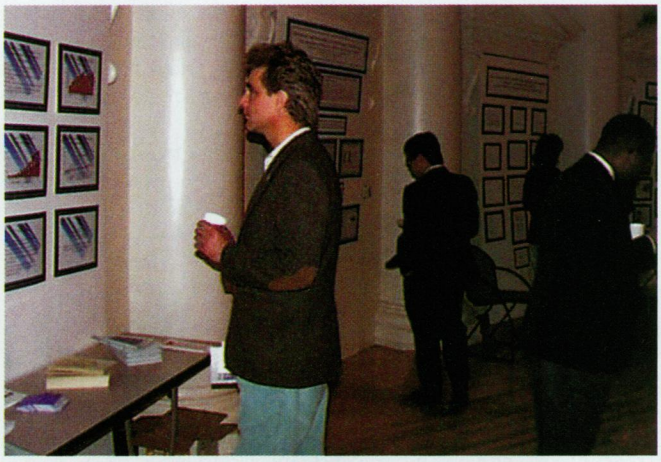
Comments were made on topics including air pollution and human health, cancer prevalence and prevention, children's health, clean water, environmental education, exposure assessment, health registries, and public health and environmental health research. Concerns were also aired about the state's proposal to deepen the New York/New Jersey Harbor by dredging. New Jersey residents are worried about where the state will put the harbor's sediment, which is contaminated by chemicals such as dioxins and metals such as mercury.

On the second day of the meeting, the keynote address was given by former New Jersey governor Jim Florio, who spoke about the brownfields initiatives and environmental justice. Panels of experts discussed regional issues of concern. For example, a panel on urban sprawl discussed how sprawl problems in New Jersey are exacerbated by the state's dense population. Jane Nogaki, pesticide program coordinator for the Belmar-based New Jersey Environmental Federation, raised the concern that, as farms are replaced by housing developments, pesticide use may actually be increasing in these new suburban areas. Lawn care and household use of pesticides exceeds agricultural use, Nogaki said. Pesticides and other chemicals are being detected at low levels in drinking water and groundwater throughout the state, she said, which could pose a potential threat to human health.

A presentation on urban environments focused on New Jersey's success in brownfields redevelopment. Panelists led by Florio and Christian Bollwage, mayor of

Rutgers/Nick Romanenko

Coffee talk. Professors Gisela Witz and Keith Cooper discuss community concerns with NIEHS official Samuel Wilson at the Center for Environmental Health Sciences.



Ellen Rochelle

Poster session. A Nashville meeting attendee examines a poster about the Middle Tennessee Poison Center.

Elizabeth, New Jersey, discussed how brownfields represent unique opportunities to transform communities that are negatively impacted by contaminated, underutilized, or abandoned properties, and how this can improve health and sustainability.

Another panel session outlined examples of successful partnerings of citizens, government, and industry to address environmental health problems, and brainstormed possible future partnerships. Discussions at the meeting have already resulted in the initiation of two pilot projects being led by the EOHSI through NIEHS-awarded grants. These projects will conduct surveys in local Latino and African-American communities about environmental health concerns. Gallo said the surveys will help in identifying problems, which is the first step toward solving them.

"This meeting was very important to us as an environmental health sciences center," said Gallo, "and it allowed some of the people from the community to meet with some high-level individuals that they wouldn't normally see." Gallo also said that input received at the meeting will be helpful in setting research priorities for the New Jersey center.

Nashville, Tennessee

The second town meeting was held 17–18 November 1998 in Nashville, Tennessee, and was hosted by Vanderbilt University's Center in Molecular Toxicology. More than 150 people attended the meeting, which emphasized the environmental and health implications of air, soil, and water pollution.

A public forum on environmental health and pollution issues in Tennessee was held the first afternoon. This two-hour question and answer session followed a keynote address by Nashville mayor Phil Bredesen. Community members and Bredesen discussed viewpoints and concerns about whether or not recycling via curbside pickup is beneficial for the environment, and the health impacts of incineration at the Nashville Thermal Transfer Plant, where the city's garbage is burned to heat and cool downtown buildings. Incineration may involve the release of toxicants into the air.

Olden responded to the concerns about garbage incineration by saying there is little information about this issue and minimal research on the combinations of chemical exposures, and that this topic should be considered when priority setting is done. "We do not have the information, so people are frustrated," Olden said. "We can generate the science. The public has to demand it."

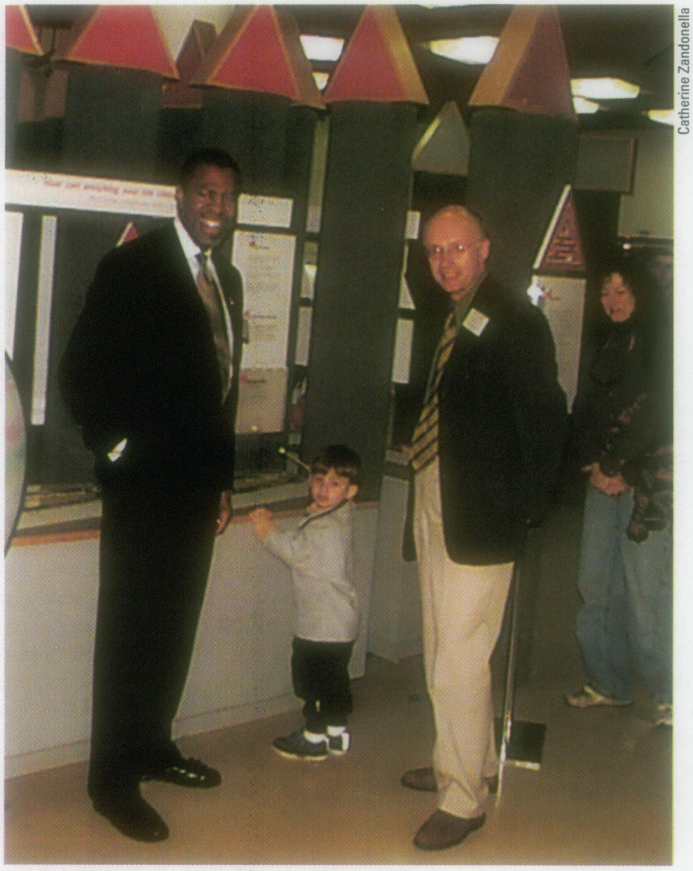
Other issues that were discussed included water quality, landfill management, endocrine disruptors, pesticides, global climate change, and environmental justice. A key issue raised was how to better interpret scientific information for the public. "The science is complex, and the public reading news articles about these issues is often bewildered," said Alan Jones, executive director of the Tennessee Environmental Council, an environmental education and advocacy organization. "How could we do a better job of letting the public know what the state of the science is?" he asked. "Where does the average citizen go for information [on environmental health issues] today? The public education need is not being met." Jones said community groups will continue to talk with Vanderbilt and the NIEHS about these issues. In fact, they have met with Vanderbilt since the town meeting to discuss the development of an information network program and to brainstorm ideas such as expanding the environmental health information already available on Vanderbilt's Web site.

The second day of the meeting involved a series of panel discussions addressing waste management and soil, air, and water pollution. Panelists focused primarily on regulatory issues and ways to address pollution. Tennessee has the second-highest volume of air toxics released in the United States, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Toxics Release Inventory. Jones said the state currently does not have a state air toxics regulatory program, but legislators are considering such a program.

Frank Bonfiglio, program director of the Middle Tennessee Poison Center and an assistant professor of medicine at Vanderbilt University, said of the town meeting, "This was one of the first opportunities to really understand the concerns that people in the community have." In turn, he said, the meeting gave the opportunity for members of the community "to see that we are people they can turn to. We do have names and faces." The meeting not only provided researchers with the community's perspective, but also allowed them to network with other attendees, which "provided valuable resources that a lot of us didn't know we had," Bonfiglio said. Wilson agreed that community groups and academic scientists can benefit mutually from closer interactions and partnerships.

Center for Environmental Genetics

Seeking justice. Panelist Linda Briscoe of Communities United for Action shares her group's mission with Cincinnati meeting attendees.



Catherine Zandonella

For the children. Kenneth Olden and Martyn Smith visit with a child at play in the Lawrence Hall of Science, where the Berkeley town meeting was held.

Fred Guengerich, director of the Center in Molecular Toxicology, agreed. He said, "I feel that it is beneficial for meetings such as these not only to display the problems, but also to show how some of the issues are being dealt with by groups and organizations in the area."

Cincinnati, Ohio

On 19–20 January 1999, about 230 people attended a town meeting titled "Preventing Environmental Disease: Barriers and Solutions" at the Cincinnati Museum Center. The meeting was hosted by the University of Cincinnati's Center for Environmental Genetics.

In an often emotional open discussion of environmental health concerns moderated by Cincinnati mayor Roxanne Qualls, many of the community members expressed concerns about specific neighborhoods with environmental problems that they believe contribute to health problems of people living in those neighborhoods. Such environmental problems include air and drinking water pollution and lead and asbestos exposures, which community members believe may be linked to incidence of asthma, leukemia, and other cancers. Along with these concerns emerged the issue that community residents feel that environmental regulations are not being enforced by local officials.

"Cincinnati is an industrial city sitting in a geographic basin, and has a number of environmental health problems," said Pauletta Hansel, assistant director of the Urban Appalachian Council, an organization that provides services and advocacy to low-income residents in the Cincinnati area. "We are not necessarily looking at ways scientists can do research for the community, but rather the way scientists can do research with the community," she said.

The Urban Appalachian Council is currently working under an NIEHS environmental justice grant with a low-income industrialized neighborhood called Lower Price Hill to determine what environmental health problems exist in the area. The health problems in Lower Price Hill and other similar neighborhoods were extensively discussed during the forum.

Marshall Anderson, director of the Center for Environmental Genetics, said of the forum, "Clearly, the community was asking the scientists to please listen to their concerns and translate their concerns to see if we can help them alleviate their problems. They're saying, 'Our common sense tells us something is wrong. Please listen.'"

One particular concern that emerged from the meeting was an apparent high rate of cancers in Marion, Ohio. Anderson plans to investigate rates of reported cancers in the area to determine if there is a cancer cluster, which may indicate an environmentally related cause.

The meeting also included a day-long series of information sessions by expert panelists on topics such as environmental susceptibility genes, asthma and respiratory diseases, lead-related disease, and environmental genetics. The sessions allowed time for questions from the audience. "A start was made here," said Anderson. If the science is delivered in an appropriate way, he said, "the public begins to understand what research is all about."

In return, the scientific attendees were given a new perspective on what type of research is needed to address the community's concerns. "This meeting was a very eye-opening experience for many of our faculty who usually conduct laboratory studies," said Robert Bornschein, a professor of environmental health at the University of Cincinnati. "The communities are dealing with complex mixtures at low levels. As scientists, we are often studying single chemicals at high levels."

University officials plan to hold follow-up meetings to increase communication and to educate the public on research and preventive measures. "The meetings should evolve and perhaps address different issues," said Bornschein. "This was a first step."

Berkeley, California

Leaders of the University of California at Berkeley NIEHS/EPA Superfund Basic Research Program chose to focus their 19 February 1999 town meeting on children's health with an emphasis on healthy schools. About 160 people attended the meeting, which was held, appropriately, at the Lawrence Hall of Science, home to an interactive children's museum.

"The most significant thing about this meeting is that the range of people—scientists, educators, environmental activists, regulators, enforcers—are all united by one thing: a concern for kids," said Felicia Marcus, regional administrator for EPA Region IX. Marcus discussed the importance of not thinking of children as small adults, but rather considering their special needs and characteristics, such as their high rate of development and growth, and their wide range of exposures to different substances.

Issues discussed at the meeting included the potential impacts of pesticides on children's health, asthma and air pollution, childhood leukemia, and environmental justice. John Phillips, a labor relations associate for the union Civil Service Employees Association and a board member of the Albany, New York-based Healthy Schools Network, a coalition of parent, public health, environment, and education groups, said, "It is sad and somewhat ironic that our members are asked to search for bombs, but rarely are they asked to search for toxics." Panelists discussed successful models for healthy schools, indoor air quality tools, lead safety

training, and the implementation of such programs.

One concern expressed by community members was that scientific studies are often technical and difficult to understand. Attendees suggested that scientists rewrite their studies for a lay audience so that the results are easier to understand. "Often there's a disconnect," said Wilson in responding to this concern. "The researchers and elected officials are not able to connect well enough with the community. This is a challenge that the entire NIH community is working on. In holding a town meeting like this, what we're interested in [on the federal level] is encouraging lines of communication."

"This was a good start," said Martyn Smith, director of the Superfund Basic Research Program, of the Berkeley meeting. "We outlined the progress we've made and the problems we face. We've got the players; now we need more dialogue and more people brought in."

Most of the town meeting participants agreed that the meetings are not a solution in and of themselves, but a starting point toward solving environmental health problems. Olden said that the meetings have confirmed that the NIEHS research agenda includes issues that people are concerned about. However, he added, the meetings have demonstrated that more and different types of research are needed. Specifically, population-based studies and direct measures of exposure are crucial research tools for solving environmental health problems.

NIEHS officials want to see more town meetings and increased communication in the future. "The individual community groups and households know what the problems are on a community level," said Wilson. "Academics need to set the research agenda in a fashion that will directly address the community problems. The NIEHS is working on setting up additional programs to meet communities' needs and foster community-based partnerships."

Brandy E. Fisher